

**Sunday of Orthodoxy Sermon**  
**His Beatitude Metropolitan Tikhon**  
**March 8, 2020**  
**Hebrews 11:24-26, 32-12:2; John 1:43-51**

In the midst of doctrinal disputes about the divinity of the Holy Spirit, St. Basil the Great, at the end of the fourth century, said, "...we speak of an emperor, and of the emperor's image, and not of two emperors. The majesty is not divided in two, nor the glory divided. The sovereignty and authority over us is one, and so the doxology ascribed by us is not plural but one; *because the honor paid to the image passes on to the prototype.*" St. Basil here makes an argument about the consubstantiality of the persons of the Holy Trinity. He compares the relationship of the image of an emperor to the emperor himself and says that this relationship is based on imitation, while the relationship of the persons of the Trinity is "by nature." Basil says, "in works of art the likeness is dependent on the form, but in the case of the divine...the union consists in the communion of the Godhead (*On the Holy Spirit XVIII.45.*)" This Sunday, the first of the Holy Forty Days, the Sunday of Orthodoxy, while marking one particular historical event, celebrates especially what St. Basil speaks about in this passage: the implication of the relationship between image (icons) and prototype, and our faith in him who is depicted on the icons, namely "Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and [who] is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12.2)."

The particular historical event that we mark today is the end of a 120-yearlong theological and liturgical controversy concerning the use and veneration of icons that occurred in the Byzantine Empire from the beginning of the eighth century until the middle of the ninth. After years of this controversy, a man, Patriarch Methodios the Confessor, an ardent supporter of the use and veneration of icons became Patriarch of Constantinople, and ascended the patriarchal throne the first Sunday of Great Lent in 843. A year later, again on the first Sunday of Great Lent, the Church commemorated his ascent and celebrated the profound implications of his ascendancy: the final restoration of the use and veneration of icons in the Church. To our own day, this Sunday has been given over to the commemoration of this great triumph of the Orthodox faith. The restoration of icons does not, in other words, represent a mere controversy over the use and veneration of icons, an argument over the place of Christian art, but carries with it the basic proclamation of the Orthodox Christian faith. We do not use or venerate wood, silver, gold, fashioned by the hand of men, but, as St. Basil says, our worship is accorded to him, whom the icon portrays.

And here is the point to insist on, to defend, and, now in our own day, to proclaim, to profess, to celebrate. If God were amorphous, completely unknowable; if he were disinterested in his creation; if he had not revealed himself to us, then there would be nothing to depict on an icon. Our God, however, has revealed himself to us. In today's Gospel, he sits beneath the fig tree, an image of both the tree of life with the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, but also the tree of life, the cross, upon which our Lord will take his place for the salvation of all and the restoration of our life in paradise. Contemplating this passage further, we are led to see that our God is not a god along the lines of pagan myths, known for great depravity and violence, but it is the God who both created us and who saves us out of love. See how our God, Jesus Christ, knows us by name, *Philip, Nathanael*, who looked and saw us before we saw him. He is our God, Jesus Christ, who is portrayed on the icons, and he is *whom* we celebrate today.

Thus the commemoration of this Sunday is nothing else than a celebration of faith in Jesus Christ and hope in his salvation. It is the apostolic witness of Philip, "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph (John 1:46)." As our Lord himself says elsewhere in the Gospel, "if you believed Moses, you would have believed me (John 5:46)." Moses himself saw the coming of Jesus when he said, "The Lord our God will raise up for you from your brothers a prophet like me (Deuteronomy 18:15)."

If we receive this testimony of the apostolic and prophetic word, and if then we receive in our midst on the wood and panels and the walls, the great images that are displayed there of grace and salvation for the whole world, then we proclaim him who was seen and lived among men and women – not a disinterested god –, and cured sufferings and sickness with mighty acts of healing, and was crucified, and buried, and rose again – not a god of the myths. We confess that he did and suffered all this for our sake and for our salvation. Our worship today, our veneration, our love goes not to the material objects, but to the God alone, who is so great and who has done so many marvelous deeds.

If we profess this, indeed, if we confess this and celebrate this today, let us also realize the great and profound implications of our faith in Jesus Christ. Celebrating today is for nothing if we do it just to celebrate. But like the image and the prototype, we must move from celebration to him who forms the reason of our celebration, Jesus Christ. Greater things will be seen in our lives than a rote liturgical celebration. The Gospel tells us, "You shall see greater things than these. You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man (John 1:50-51)." To receive such a vision, we must run in dogged pursuit of Christ, devoting our lives to him, striving above all else to come to the knowledge of him. This knowledge, a knowledge that will transform us, is found in giving

ourselves in service to one another, a searching reading of the scriptures, attendance and participation in the services of the Church, a regular prayer life, and, as this Sunday indicates, in the use and veneration of icons. Our use of the them is both an opportunity to learn of the great deeds, works, and words of our Savior, the deeds, works, and words that save us, but our use and veneration of icons also serves as a confession of our own faith in him.